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An-Binh Thi Phung
2020

**The Thesis Committee for An-Binh Thi Phung
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**GREEN SCREEN AS AN INDEX FOR SEEING, HOW TO BE:
GREEN**

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Kristin Lucas, Supervisor

Kathryn McCarthy

Green Screen as an Index for Seeing (How to Be Green)

by

An-Binh Thi Phung

Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

August 2020

Dedication

For Me, Ba, Co Minh, Ba Co, and the rest of my extended family that are an infinite source of love and care.

Abstract

Green Screen as an Index for Seeing (How to Be Green)

An-binh Thi Phung, MFA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2020

Supervisor: Kristin Lucas

An introduction to the history and usage of green screen in film and other forms of media culture and a descriptions of works made by An-Binh Thi Phung in conjunction with this research. The special effect is analyzed in relationship to philosophical concepts such as the gaze and a the supermodern “non-place” to formulate a system of representing identity.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I am a video and performance artist. My art is concerned with how my identity is technologically and spiritually constructed, reflected, and enforced by encounters with mass media culture. This paper reflects my research and experiments in green screen keying with myself as a test subject and touches briefly on the historical background and conceptual predecessors of the green screen.

Through the green screen technique, I address my experiences of erasure, desire, and failure in an attempt to reconstruct my identity and empower myself within a media landscape. Like a mask, the green screen can be weaponized to trick and enchant the viewer while obscuring greater forces of power. My treatment of the green screen is also informed by that of a non-place: a term of supermodernity that describes places without historical or personal importance; a liminal space that is travelled through, where one becomes anonymous and situates themselves based on their surrounding images and texts—which happen to be signs, advertisements, and labels. Non-places and green screen both have the potential to empty and reinterpret projections of identity.

Chapter 2: Predator

The movie Predator is set in a third world country among the fauna of a jungle; its characters are American soldiers fighting against an invisible other. Even though the film is set in South America, there are associations with portrayals of the Vietnam War. The pulsing roar of a helicopter descending, the pristine tropicalia suddenly invaded by a band of crude, archetypical soldiers brought up associations with iconic images taken during the first televised war: the burning monk, napalm girl. The dissemination of horrific images, and the retelling of a semi-specific third world vs. first world, us vs. them dynamic throughout the movie created a situation that led to me relating more and more with the Predator. The Predator is a classic anti-hero, an opponent as worthy as Arnold Schwarzenegger himself. While coded as a villain, the Predator, by movie philosophy, only hunts those that pose a real danger. Ignoring pregnant women and unarmed civilians, the Predator goes after the forces that have guns, bombs, and superior machinery. So I side with the alien monster. It's easy to root against the military despite being coded as the films heros, with the knowledge of their state sanctioned massacres, proclivity towards torture, and general cruelty towards third world nations.

By embodying the other that has been formulated in the eyes of the dominant hegemonic subject, I was able to move freely with the newly reclaimed powers of the Hollywood monster: invisibility, a bionic body, and a kind of personal cruelty that shocked even the hardest of soldiers (I am referring to the tendency of the Predator to skin and mount their victims, though again I want to emphasize that the victims themselves are state-sanctioned killers).

To transform into the Predator, I used the special effects technology of color keying. When painted green against a green background one is camouflaged, and with keying one has the potential to be invisible—just like the Predator. At the same time, the process was a deconstruction of the encoded messages that inevitably shape a collective knowledge of the Other, whether historical or fictional. By appropriating the film's tropes and technical construction, I cemented my identification with the Predator, intertwining my personal history with the premise of a summer blockbuster.

As the Predator, I feel like an avenger for the war that no one won, a ghost of violence mediated on film first as documentary then as Hollywood franchise. My version of Predator is an addendum to the continual formation of the other, a history evolving with the aid of green screen. The Predator is retaliatory and haunting, and its birth was conceptualized within a system of oppression that is performed over and over again through various forms of media. While performing the Predator I demanded to be looked at while creating a space of conscious denial, giving agency to myself as both a viewer and subject. I consider the Predator mask and performance as a form of self-portraiture that reflects the materiality of film conventions.



Figure 1: *Jungle Pose*, 2018, Inkjet print on semi gloss paper, 56" x 36"

This was my first successful test as the Predator. I chose to get a franchise specific mask: a direct reference to the movie, but also a literal fruit born from the powers of cinema. The movie spawned this mask, and wearing it seamlessly folded me into the Predator universe. While I am painted completely green, posing against a green backdrop, I am doubly invisible in my mask. As a fraudulent/imitation Predator character that easily slips into the photo of a Vietnamese jungle, the cinematic and factual backgrounds are layered in the green space that gives me the possibility of entering the movie, and adding agency to the villainized monster. As the subject, my pose is heavily coded: the reclining nude denies access to both my identity and body thanks to my green screen camouflage. My body becomes a part of the landscape but the mask is clear as day, a strategy that I later invert as I investigate the materiality of the green screen, before it is activated through digital composition.



Figure 2: Predator with *Family Portrait Series*, 2018, installation

A portrait of my family is mounted flush against the green screen cyclorama wall, the same location where the photograph was earlier staged, a performance of doubled presence. Furthermore, the green on green creates a floating effect that optically extends the depth between the physical photograph and the wall; an illusion that conflates flatness and dimension, and situates the viewer somewhere in between the immediate environment and a media object. Strategically, the photograph is an inversion of Jungle Pose. The Predator mask is painted green and the color keying has yet to intervene as the viewer encounters the photograph. In our family portrait, the place of Vietnam becomes

encoded on my parents' body, the genesis which made me. As I transformed into the Predator I began to wonder about her personal life, where she came from, biological aspects that were interlaced with my own personal history. The Predator was *like me* but better—an idealization that existed only as a media text.

I think the power of this photograph is the love in front of it, presented on my Mom and Dad's faces and disposition. Behind this photograph I will say my parents came at the drop of a pin, willing to support me regardless of the absurdity of the situation.

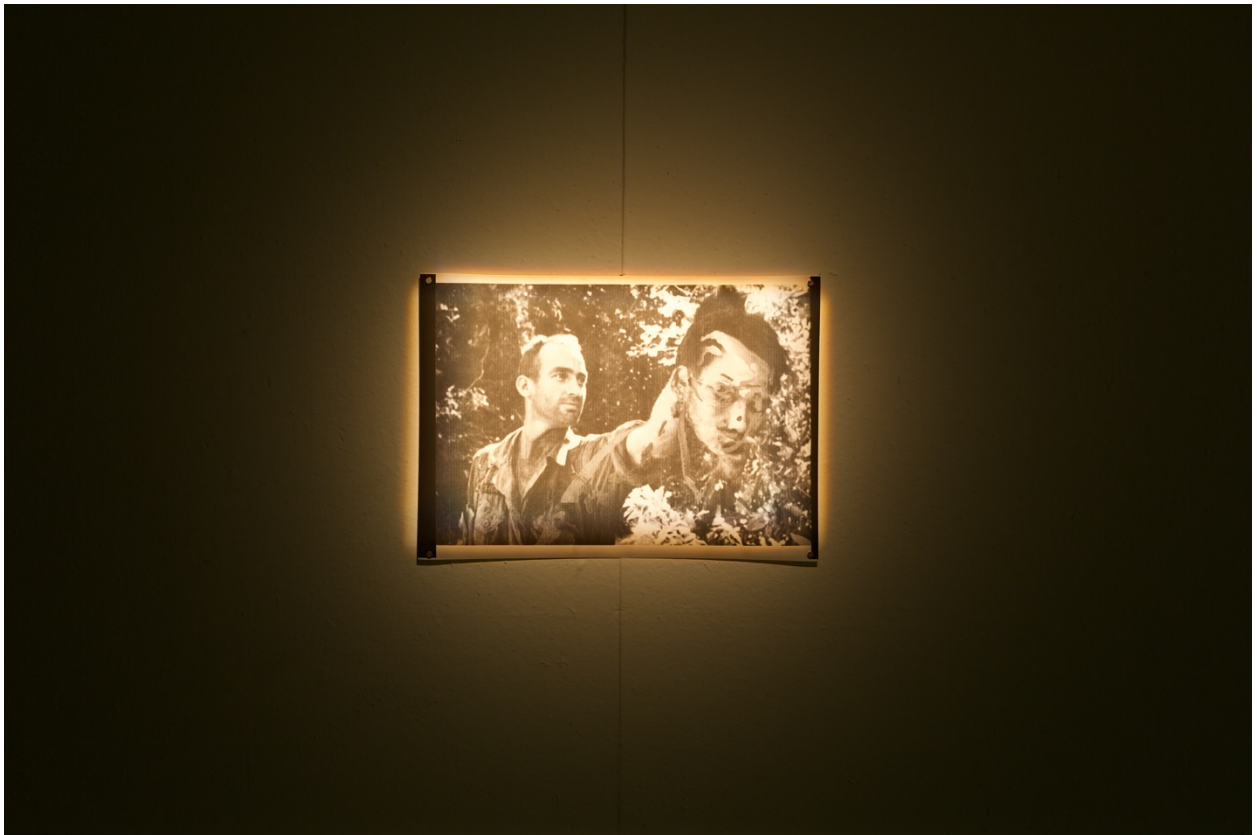


Figure 3: *Getty Images*, 2018, Backlit inkjet print on art paper, 8'' x 11''

This is my favorite image among a series of Vietnam War images altered to include myself, sometimes as the Predator. The public domain images portrayed life during war time with the Vietnamese people as the subject. I joined school girls, soldiers, the dead and the mutilated, travelling back in time with green screen methods to insert myself in representations of the past enemy. I loved the decapitated head in the picture—an American soldier beaming with pride while holding the twisted face of a beheaded man—so I replaced the dead man’s head with my head: glaring, angrily, alive past the proud soldier’s time; gestures to the visceral presence of the mask while the soldier plucks my digital bust from my literal body, only to be replaced by the superhuman Predator.

The image also gave me a perverse joy to see severe violence on my body. The photo of the man was real and a document of his immeasurable suffering made public. I acknowledge the appropriation of this context and the privilege to live as I do today. My insertion was an attempt for the transference of pain, an outlet in which the depiction confounds truth and emotion. The image could be seen as macabre or a death wish, though the digital life has the advantage of being able to live and die over and over again.

Chapter 3: Green Screen Background



Figure 4: Still from *Thief of Bagdad*

FREE, FREE! HAHAAHAHA!!!!!!!

Free; after two thousand years. Two thousand years ago, King Solomon, Master of all the Dijinn, imprisoned me in that bottle. AH-HAHAAHAHAHA!!!! For me, this is the first moment of my new freedom; but for you, HAHAAHAHA!!!!!!!!!!!!, for you, this is the last moment of your life!

-Genie, *Thief of Bagdad* (1940)

Larry Butler won an Oscar in special effects for the scene above, set in times of Arabian nights and performed by a predominantly white cast. The irony does not escape me that the very tool I've used to reclaim my ethnic identity has its roots in a spectacularly colonial representation of the other. The use of green screen keying in the film is twofold: to transport the viewer to a far off land and to transform the performer

beyond human limitations. At the heart of the technique is its adaptation to the lens and its surroundings, contingent on the lighting of the set, the color of skin, and the likeliness of clothing color. Two color images are composited to form one, removing and adding the figure or background based on extracted color hues. While the process of green screen keying is simple, maybe even familiar, the desires to use and develop it are as old as time. When used as a background one can travel to any place, from the most mundane of everyday locations and everywoman situations, to abstract and conceptual impossibilities, the resulting artifice expanding the limits of what we recognize as setting or context. When used on a person one is transmogrified in equal abundance and together the objective is clear: take woman to where she cannot go and turn her into what she cannot be.

The history of green screen is intimately tied to a lineage of moving image technology and the stories they tell. Double exposures, rotoscoping then the masking and layering of camera mattes evolved into the travelling matte. Then came the bluescreen, followed closely by the green screen I chose to adapt in my work and writing. The use of keying has far advanced to implement machine vision and machine thinking and while the literal green screen could be considered outdated, my treatment of the term “green screen” encapsulates the ongoing technical and cultural history of what is, at the end of the day, a special effect.

A notable moment in compositing history is the film *The Invisible Man* (1933), in which the titular character is shot against a travelling matte while wearing the same color as the black background to achieve his invisibility. The special effect is weaponized

against the townspeople, allowing the invisible man to wreak havoc undetected. The ability to disappear, to not be seen or observed while still maintaining a presence is echoed in the role of the TV viewer who watches the scene but cannot be watched herself. The Invisible Man, as a film object, points to the situation of the gaze, or lack thereof, that defines the viewing experience. How do you watch something that you cannot see other than by the contours of what it is not?

The conception of the gaze has existential and cinematic roots. From Sartre's "the look" to Laura Mulvey's "male gaze", there is always a subject object relationship that is being established within a greater context that has ramifications on power, identity, and ideology. Green screen, with its secondary insertion, could imply a second, material layer of the gaze that operates beyond its cinematic predecessor.

"The nature of video performance is specified as an activity of bracketing out the text and substituting for it the mirror-reflection. The result of this substitution is the presentation of a self understood to have no past, and as well, no connection with any objects that are external to it. For the double that appears on the monitor cannot be called a true external object. Rather it is the displacement of the self which has the effect...of transforming the performer's subjectivity into another, mirror, object."

-Rosalind Krauss, Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism

The camera is a mechanical eye that gazes upon reality. It plays back memory, subjectively framed by artistic and technological decisions. While the lens takes the place of the eyes, the circulation of its evidence reveals visions of post-colonialism, misogyny and power relations. The cinematic gaze necessitates a screen and from this screen we

can make the leap to a mirror. When I direct the camera at myself and watch the subsequent video, I re-enact the reflexive mirror stage that is conditional to Rosalind Krauss's definition of video art.

If the screen is said to be a mirror what does the green screen add to this reflection? I'm interested in its ubiquity to media culture, how it is used and what it signals, which in most cases is the proof of something inauthentic but convincingly rendered. Our encounters with green screen and compositing surround our everyday, from applications and features contained in our phones to banal advertisements that invade our exterior space. By acknowledging and re-appropriating the use of green screen it becomes a cultural text, one that could out-live its original use value and consciously redefine our lived experiences.

The green screen, a pathological mirror—I can't help but look at myself when I pass a reflective surface. Green is the color of desire and I look great. I bet you are wondering how I got to be so well-adjusted and successful and I will tell you my secret: much green. No more is the me that sleeps for 14 hours and stares blankly at a screen hopelessly entrapped by an addiction to stimuli. Now I stare at the green screen and let myself become exhumed from fear and depression, basking in the infinite glow of a dimensionless green void.

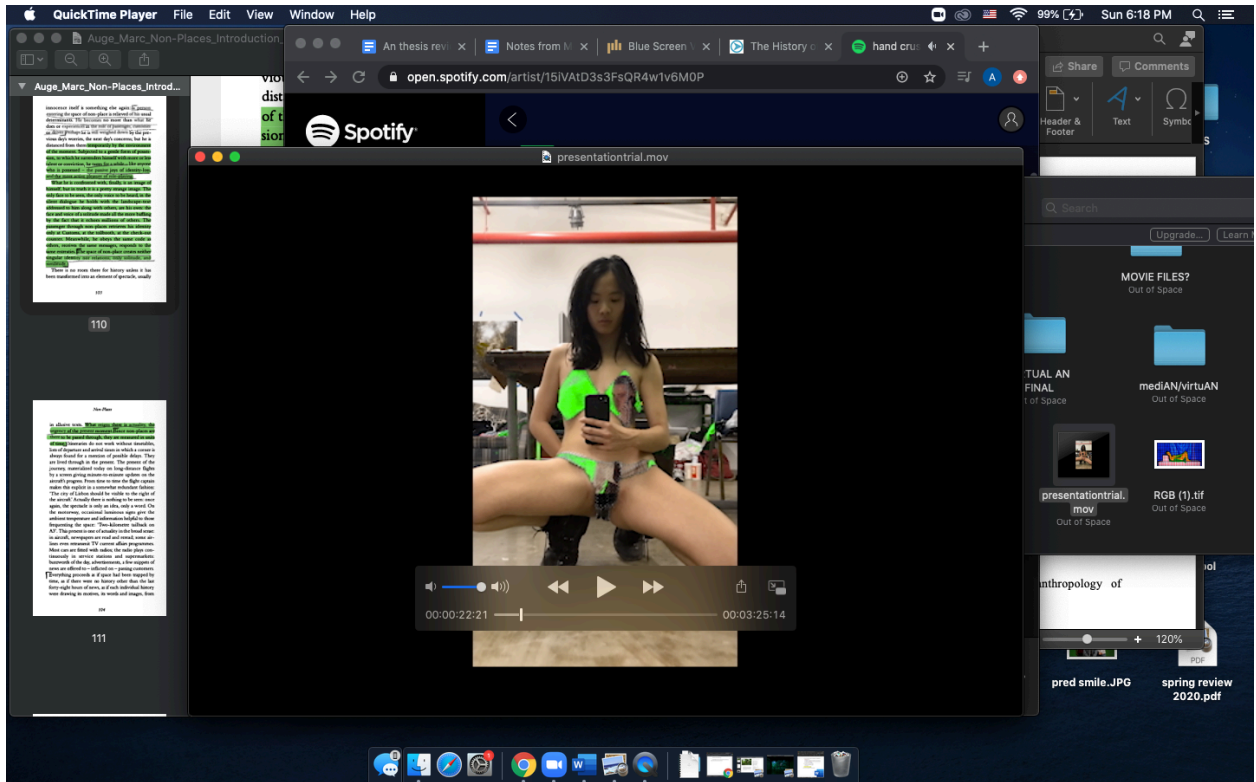


Figure 5: *Green Screen Bikini*, 2019, still from multi-channel video installation, 3:26 mins

Transforming a chainmail bikini into a green screen allowed me to further experiment with enmeshing myself deeper within the material by wearing it—opening the possibilities to feel and touch the green screen as a physical presence. It was imperative that the bikini was made of chainmail, its hypnotic swish provides the grating soundtrack to the video. In the video I model the bikini in a stereotypical photo studio setting, posing in coded positions that emotionally range from comedic to submissive, empowered and sexualized. Projected on the bikini are various stock images and videos

depicting universal events and emotions such as childbirth, explosions, celebration, sadness, nature, a child crying, and rice, drifting outwards from my keyed-in-bikini while I shake my chest back and forth. The chain mail soundtrack crescendos, culminating in an exasperated sigh while a man reenacts coming up on molly. The video enacts the projection of desire, its simultaneous fulfillment and denial made possible by the abilities of the green screen bikini and my complicity wearing it. And while I made myself an object for the gaze, in every scene I confront and stare, forcing eye contact with the photographer and the viewer.

The video was presented in a computer lab, playing on every computer and projected even larger on one of the walls. The room was completely dark and evoked a hybrid of internet cafe peepshows and the curtained off rooms in the back of by-gone video rental stores. I wanted to establish intimacy and emphasize the dynamics of voyeurism in the act of viewing. The green screening of stock images (some also set against a green screen as well) on my body form a text as landscape situation, an aspect of a non-place.

Chapter 4: Green Screen as a Non-Place

“If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which can not be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place.” (Auge, 84)

My idea of the green screen is framed by the concept of a NON-PLACE, coined by French anthropologist Marc Auge in his book, “Non-Places: An Introduction to the Anthropology of Supermodernity”. In this book Auge ruminates on how the study of civilizations have historically changed with the progression of globalization and technologization. How the understanding of culture, identity, and locality are affected by an overall transition to modernity. The non-place is constantly defined in contrast to places and spaces, though the three terms often intermingle with one another. Yet the growing distinction between the non-place, places, and spaces crystallizes under the conditions of supermodernity. The expansion and acceleration of time, space and ego are in effect today, carving out more and more opportunities where a non-place might spawn. Supermarkets, subway stations, hotel rooms, chatrooms, monuments of itinerant movement are just a few examples.

Like the green screens, non-places have been around for a while. According to Auge, the traveler’s space: the observation between person and landscape as they move is the archetype for non-places. It is in the spectacle of observation itself that forms the identity of the traveler. The non-place is wholly subjective, time-based, and transactionary in nature. Words and symbols also play a part in the formation of the non-

place, as Auge describes the terrain as a landscape-text, where train schedules, grocery aisles and highway signs are the expression of the non-place.

Green screens and non-places are structurally similar, familiar yet nondescript. They can be disseminated through media and service a process of consumption that absorbs your identity at the service of a greater social construct—in the case of green screen it is desire. The green screen is a physical backdrop but also a virtual space when transferred from the camera to the computer screen. At this junction I began to think about a green screen as a virtual non-place.



Figure 6: *Virtual Racquetball*, 2020, virtual experience

This is an experience in which the viewer steps into a small elevator and puts on the virtual reality goggles. The elevator only goes up one floor and I am conducting the

elevator to constantly go up and down to control admittance to the elevator while hopefully inducing vertigo. Meanwhile the viewer experiences my first person perspective of a racquetball match against another student. To film this I strapped a Go-Pro on my chest, recording my bodily movements, the squeak of the court, and my exasperated reactions to plays in the game. While the viewer blindly moves around the cramped elevator, their virtual presence sees a black void with a runway leading to various geometric forms. Projected on these forms is a high angle shot of me, playing racquetball by myself in a shed—an excerpt from a separate performance. The viewer/player has two choices: observe the video with limited mobility, or walk off the runway ledge, falling endlessly and exiting the experience. My hope is that their virtual descent coincides with the physical movement of the elevator shifting up and down, giving a bodily response to the viewers decision to cease existing in the logic of the game, committing a kind of suicide.

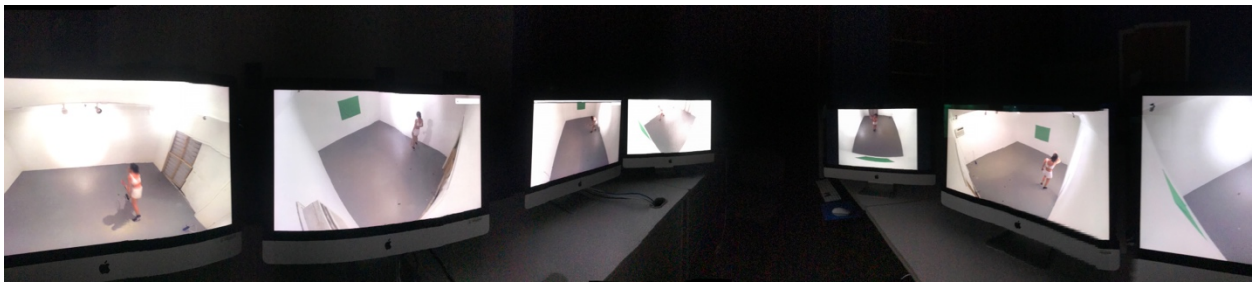


Figure 7: *Shed Ball*, 2019, 8-channel video installation

For this performance I mounted 8 Go Pros along the ceiling of a shed and recorded myself playing racquetball against myself, aiming for a green cloth square on one of the walls. The final form is a video installation presented on monitors. For some

versions of the video I chroma-keyed a video of myself as the target, a self-effacing act considering I am aiming as hard as I can to hit the cloth. I was interested in the replacement of spaces and rules of racquetball to serve a psychological purpose. Stripped of its context the court was a 6 walled box, and the impetus of the game was to defeat myself in this endless game of inevitable failure, because when playing against myself, even if I win I still have to lose. The videos have taken on various mutations, positioned as reflections of each other or parts of a whole. Each screen resembles a cage, the architecture of the recorded shed in conversation with the planes of the screen.

Chapter 5: Sleep Videos

Sleeping is one of my most favorite things about being alive in this world. It is my sweetest escape and most fatal flaw. Excessive sleeping is a symptom of depression and can accelerate the path towards death, but sleeping is the only way to access the dream world—a reality both so vivid and sensuous that impossible perspectives are born—ones of different gender, race, or physical limitation. To name a few examples: I have experienced the perspective of a man, of giving birth, and adventures of life and death in some instances, and in others replaying the mundane activities of my everyday life. In the dream state one has direct access to forms of embodiment that could be approached through virtual reality—a cross wiring in the brain that worked like a simulation that blends real and artificial space.

It is with foolish pride that I can sleep for hours on end while thirsting for more. I love the moment right before one falls asleep, the conscious voice giving up to dissolution. A fleeting joy, I force myself to sleep more and more like a chase for the dragon. But the delicious experience of sweet rest has been a form of entrapment, causing me to miss classes, appointments, interviews and countless other important events. Sleeping is pure escape, in my case voluntarily blacking out and ceding control of my senses and wills to a higher force. While I am asleep, I cannot work, and I won't work until I've gotten enough sleep.

On the one hand, I've been able to get this far while out-sleeping all of my peers. On the other hand I was missing a much more consequential waking life, in favor of a completely private world of my own that at the very least, felt realistic. Because I am the subject of almost all my artworks, I turn my attention to this major dimension of my life in hopes of resolving and improving it.



Figure 8: *The Big Sleep*, 2019, video projection, 4:44 mins

In this video performance I recorded myself sleeping in my room, framed as a closeup squarely on my face. The video, looped to the recommended 8 hours of sleep, narratively depicts my descent into slumber. There is tossing and turning, snoring, and the video is brightly lit the entire time—a witness to my indestructible ability to sleep at any cost. The video is used in different iterations, projected on a wall as a racquetball opponent, and used as a self-portrait that plays as part of a CCR TV sculpture.



Figure 9: *Green screen cry/sleep/yawn*, 2020, still from video, 16:00 mins

Green screen cry/yawn is a 16 hour video montage of stock images based on search results for “crying, “sleeping” and “yawning”. Like *green screen bikini*, I was interested in the cultural representations of everyday experiences, honing in on the ones that I specifically felt I was doing all the time and had negative associations with. I also wanted the video to be a durational performance, setting the time for the longest amount of time I’ve ever slept.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

My work with green screen has been an attempt to bolster its legitimacy as a cultural text. Something that can be studied, communicated, and re-evaluated because of its significance as a cultural experience. My perspective of the green screen is conceptual and physical. How it functions as a media apparatus bridges the potential for the screen space to be a “non-place”. If the green screen visually performs these possibilities, its effects could be exploited for the better, exposing our surrounding media landscape as malleable and artificial and decentering our conceptions of the self and the Other. My use of green screen was also a search for spiritual truth that reconciliation with the various formations of my identity: the victim, the monster, the model, the loser, the athlete, the body and mind that is embroiled in the demands of present time.

I hope one day my research culminates into a Green Screen Manifesto that is a standard for literacy and activation of the green screen. As our bodies and experiences become more and more mechanized, it only makes sense to use a tool native to the space of mediation in hopes of disrupting the forces of power inside and outside of ourselves.

Glossary

GREEN:

Green Screen as RGB Color Value: 0, 177, 64. Green Screen as CMYK Color Value: 81, 0, 92, 0. Green Screen as Hex Color Value: #00b140. Green Screen as Websafe Color Value: #009933.

In Vietnamese, green and blue share the same word. Màu xanh lá cây and màu xanh dương—translating to color of leaves and color of sea.

Like all colors on the visible spectrum, the concept of green is polysemic across time and culture, symbolizing an array of meanings that could refer to, for example, economic status, political identity, emotional state, or most obviously, nature. Green is an ancient color, one of the first colors to hit the primordial eye. Greenery—trees, grass, plants—predate the creation of language and society. Photosynthesis is green, environmentalism is green, money (USD) is green. The definitions of green accumulate and evolve in their relation to us over time. The specificity of “green” in green screen is in itself a composite of cultural meaning that is contextualized by the technology from whence it came.

NON-PLACE:

Marc Auge introduces non-places by describing the journey of a business man by plane. The narrative details encounters that the man has as he arrives, enters, and travels through a non-place. The man navigates check out counters, duty free shops, and airline magazines advertising exotic destinations and luxury cars. Auge concludes the description with the man at peace—alone at last. Built in to the narrative are the passive and sensuous aspects of experiencing a non-place. The mundanity, the occupation of space and the subjugated anonymity which is actually a relief to the weary traveler.

STOCK FOOTAGE:

There is an entire industry around the production of stock media. People are hired to act, direct, and produce all-purpose representations of places, things, concepts, feelings, situations, events, and people performing an aesthetic range of identities both broad and niche.

When sifting through stock options one notices the variations in the construction of the image. One sees repeating actors performing different roles, or the same action but with the choices of a medium close-up, close-up, or extreme close-up shot. Some film sets are slick while others appear on the lower budget end.

My use of stock footage is not specific to the ready-made scenes that are bought and circulated for a myriad of purposes: educational, corporate, amateur etc. Stock footage also encompasses an index of historical images, depicting true events and shot with the supposed “realism” of observational documentary. Stock images can be public domain,

and government agencies are the largest producers of such content. Stock footage implies the demand for some kind of media as a place holder for experiencing the real thing. In making my work I gravitated towards performers that resembled me, narrowing my searches to fit my physical and later, emotional states.

Stock images are funny in that they are so clearly fabricated. The more media-savvy the viewer, the more likely they are to recognize the artifice of the situation. And lastly there is the logo, a ghostly layer wrapped around the image that reveals just enough of content while reminding the viewer of the status of media as property.

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